

General elections on September 17, 2014, produced a democratically elected government, the first since a military coup in 2006. The Election Commission rejected all allegations of “corrupt and unlawful practices,” and the 90-member Multinational Observers Group confirmed that the elections were free and fair. On September 22, J. V. Bainimarama of the Fiji First party, who had served as interim prime minister, took office with a pledge to be “the Prime Minister of all Fijians, for all Fijians.” The Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) conceded defeat. Expert observers said Fiji First’s message of cultural transformation and social-economic modernization resonated with voters in general and urban, youth, and Indo-Fijian voters in particular. The economy, poverty, and the cost of schooling were top voter concerns.

As a result of the fair and free elections, Fiji resumed talks with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States to restore military ties. Bilateral ties with Beijing and Moscow have also deepened significantly in recent years since relations soured with traditional allies after the coup.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 26 / 40 (+19) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 9 / 12 (+9)

Fiji was essentially ruled by decree after military forces overthrew the civilian government in December 2006, a state of affairs that persisted until the general elections of September 2014. The interim government approved a new constitution in 2013 that provides for a single-chamber parliament with 50 members elected to serve four-year terms in a national-constituency, proportional representation system. The party with the greatest number of seats selects the prime minister. The voting age was lowered to 18 years. Citizens overseas can vote, but only those residing in Fiji can stand as candidates.

The president is elected from parliament between two candidates, one named by the prime minister and one by the leader of the opposition. As head of state, the president—who is elected for one three-year term and eligible for reelection to a second term—holds a largely ceremonial role. The president can be removed only for incompetence or misbehavior by a tribunal appointed by the chief justice at the request of the prime minister.

The interim government declared the day of the elections a paid holiday and required employers to grant workers time off to vote. A Canadian firm created a new voter roll. Registration began in June 2012, and teams later visited countries where concentrations of Fijian citizens reside to organize international voter registration. In April 2014, the Elections Commission approved 11 organizations to conduct voter education and initiated advertising in local media in iTaukei (the Fijian vernacular), Hindi, Rotuman, Chinese, and other languages. It accredited 450 journalists, including 41 from overseas, to report on the elections, and hired 14,000 people to staff the 2,025 polling stations established nationwide. In total, 249 candidates competed in the 2014 elections, 44 of whom were women.

Bainimarama stepped down as head of the military in March 2014 in order to run in the elections. His successor in the military, Brigadier General Mosese Tikoitoga, underscored the armed forces’ commitment to support the electoral results but would not allow any elected government to rewrite the constitution.

Former prime minister and Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry was disqualified from running after the High Court convicted him in April for moving \$800,000 to Australia without government approval. Chaudhry lost his final appeal in August.

In the September elections, Fiji First won 32 parliamentary seats. SODELPA and the National Federation Party (NFP) took 15 and 3 seats, respectively. Voter turnout was 84 percent. Fewer than 4,000 of the 500,000 votes cast were invalidated. There were no reports of violence or intimidation. The Elections Commission imposed a campaigning and media blackout for 48 hours before and during the polls. While Reporters Without Borders and other media advocacy groups opposed the blackout, the Elections Commission said it protected voters from “undue influence.”

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 11 / 16 (+6)

Political affiliations tend to be associated with ethnicity. In 2013, the interim government issued a new decree requiring political parties to have English names in order to appeal to all ethnic groups and to report their finances to qualify for participation in elections. Although opposition parties have not succeeded in generating widespread voter support, there are no legal restrictions on the ability of opposition parties to campaign or participate in elections. Fiji First (launched by Prime Minister Bainimarama in March), Fiji United Freedom Party, Fiji Labor Party, NFP, One Fiji Party, People’s Democratic Party, and SODELPA are the approved parties.

Under the current electoral system, and in contrast to the previous system, no ethnic group has reserved seats or receives preferential treatment.

C. Functioning of Government: 6 / 12 (+4)

The seating of the new, democratically elected government increases government accountability.

The interim government made fighting official abuse and corruption—serious problems in Fiji—a top priority. It created the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) and has removed many officials accused of abuse and corruption. The interim government said the increasing number of complaints filed with FICAC—10,428 in 2013—was a sign of citizen trust in the institution, but political opponents criticized the interim government for failing to live up to its own standards in transparency and accountability. Prime Minister Bainimarama, for example, reported his income and assets only when election laws required him to do so.

Since the election of the new parliament, political transparency has increased through measures such as live internet broadcast of the inaugural legislative session, parliamentary sittings open to the public, official asset disclosures, and published meeting notes. The national budget is now subject to meaningful legislative review and public analysis, and is also posted online. However, despite promises from the transitional government that a formal freedom of information framework would be developed, no concrete proposals had surfaced by year’s end. Some opposition members have complained that the Fiji First-dominated parliament passes government bills and budgets without allowing adequate time for review and questions.

Civil Liberties: 34 / 60 (+4)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 11 / 16

Fiji has several private television and radio stations and newspapers. With an estimated internet penetration rate of 37 percent in 2013, more people are using online media to access news and entertainment. Internet use is unrestricted. In 2013, the International Telecommunications Union recognized the interim government for adding public internet centers, reducing cost of access, and expanding electronic government information and services.

However, the interim government also used strict media controls to silence critics. In April 2014, the Media Industry Development Authority found Fiji One News guilty of “hate speech” for broadcasting a traditional chief’s public comment on poverty among indigenous people. The United Nations, Reporters Without Borders, and the Pacific Media Center continue to press for repeal of the vaguely worded Media Industry Development Decree, which bans reporting critical of the government or harmful to “national interest or public order.”

Freedom of religion is generally respected. Hindu temples have in the past been targets of violence tied to ethnic tensions, but no such incidents were reported in 2013 or 2014. The interim government restricted the activities of critical religious organizations. In 2014, the Methodist Church—the largest in Fiji—asked its leaders to resign if they chose to run for political office in order to prevent abuse of power or undue influence.

Academic freedom is generally respected, but lack of resources affects quality of instruction. The interim government worked to remove various ethnicity-based preferences in college admissions, scholarships, and other areas. In January 2014, primary schools began mandatory instruction in English, iTaukei, and Hindi to all students in an effort to ease ethnic tensions and create a new national identity.

There were no confirmed reports of government restrictions on private discussion on political matters or other sensitive topics in 2014. Personal blogs and other forms of social media, both for and against the interim government, operated with relative freedom, unlike traditional media.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12 (+1)

The interim government imposed severe restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, but gradually relaxed them in the two years leading to the general election. Police permits are required for public gatherings and protests, but there were no reports of denials or last minute orders to cancel events in 2014, as opposed to previous years. The general environment for civil society groups and labor unions has also improved over the past two years, with no confirmed reports of harassment or restrictions in 2014.

In January 2014, workers at two major hotels walked off the job over pay issues. Six union leaders were arrested for their role in the peaceful strikes, which the government deemed unlawful. In December, the new government promised—with no timeline—to review all existing labor laws to ensure they conform to international standards and the Fijian constitution. Of particular concern to labor advocates is the Essential National Industries Decree imposed by the interim regime, which restricts collective bargaining, freedom of association, and other rights and benefits for workers.

F. Rule of Law: 9 / 16 (+3)

The interim government dismissed many judges following its 2009 suspension of the previous constitution, and critics have questioned the independence of the new justices. Shortages of personnel and resources have continued to complicate the handling of cases in a timely manner.

There were no reports of serious police misconduct in 2014. However, prisons are overcrowded and have poor sanitary and living conditions.

There have been fewer politically motivated arrests since greater political transparency was ushered in by the September elections. The 2013 constitution grants amnesty to those involved in the 2006 military coup.

Indigenous Fijians receive preferential treatment in many areas despite multiple actions by the interim government to eliminate it. An estimated 250,000 people—many of them educated and skilled Indo-Fijians—have left the island in the last 25 years due to persistent discrimination, economic hardship, and political instability.

Fiji was the first Pacific island nation to decriminalize homosexuality when the interim government abolished antisodomy laws in 2010. The 2013 constitution also bans discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, conservative social mores have resulted in continued discrimination and violence against the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 10 / 16

Citizens enjoy broad freedom to travel, live, work, and seek education inside and outside the country. In March 2014, Australia and New Zealand lifted their travel bans on senior officials in the interim government that were imposed after the coup in 2006. Citizens can freely own property and establish businesses, and Fiji's economy has recovered to some extent from the global economic recession and general atmosphere of uncertainty under the interim government.

Women are frequent victims of discrimination and violence. The interim government promised greater equality and protection for women. It also pledged to expand and improve victims' services, planning 13 new women's resource centers for 2014. Under the interim government, there was an increase of nearly 25 percent in reported cases of assault from 2011 to 2013. The government considered this a sign that victims are more willing to seek justice. Eight women won parliamentary seats in the 2014 elections.

Human trafficking, especially the sex trafficking of minors, is a significant issue in Fiji. The U.S. State Department's 2014 *Human Trafficking Report* rates Fiji as a Tier 2 country for falling short of standards to prevent and prosecute trafficking, but acknowledged efforts to comply with the guidelines set forth in the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

A dedicated crime unit monitors movement of Chinese migrants, who have been repeatedly linked to human trafficking, money laundering, prostitution, and other illegal activities. In June 2014, two men were convicted of slavery and domestic trafficking in a prostitution racket involving female minors. The cases marked the first of such convictions in Fiji.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)